

## MOTIVATION MATTERS IN MOBILE LANGUAGE LEARNING: A BRIEF COMMENTARY

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In this paper I offer a brief commentary on motivational issues in mobile language learning, drawing on empirical insights from the articles in this special issue.

**Key words:** Motivation, Autonomy, Self-determination Theory

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### INTRODUCTION

As highlighted in the original call for papers for this special issue, learning with mobile technologies is currently a rapidly developing area of interest for researchers, teachers, materials writers and app developers in the educational field, not least within language education. Yet to what extent is this growing interest realised and shared by language learners themselves? How far are they motivated to exploit the affordances offered by mobile technologies for language learning, and how far can mobile technologies help to engage and sustain individual motivation for language learning? Although learner motivation is not a core concern of the studies in this special issue, a particular strength of these papers is their common focus on the *student perspective* in relation to mobile language learning. This student perspective sheds interesting critical light on the motivational dimension of mobile language learning, which is the thread I would like to discuss in this commentary article, building on my longstanding interest in motivation in language learning and more recently in relation to the use of digital technologies in language learning (see Ushioda, 2011).

Drawing on the empirical findings reported in this special issue, I will focus my short commentary on the following motivational issues concerning mobile language learning:

- Motivation as a matter of choice and autonomy.
- Motivation as a matter of personally meaningful casual learning.

### Motivation as a matter of choice and autonomy

As Stockwell (2013) pointed out in his comprehensive discussion of motivation and technology in language learning, it is helpful to draw a conceptual distinction between two kinds of motivation that may shape why language learners engage with a particular technology: (a) an inherent interest in the technology, which then leads to discovering its benefits for language learning and to strengthening language learning motivation; (b) a strong motivation for language learning, prompting interest in a particular technology that can support and enhance this process. In other words, as Stockwell describes, students may have different points of departure when it comes to using a technology for language learning purposes. Furthermore, as theorised by Rogers (1962) in his seminal work on the diffusion and adoption of innovations and as explored in Kim et al.'s paper in this issue, people bring different degrees of motivation or readiness to embrace new technologies.

In addition to such variations in motivation for using technologies for language learning, we might add that people will also have different reasons for learning a language and different degrees of motivation, which will partly reflect the level of priority that language learning occupies in their life in relation to

other concurrent activities and pursuits (for detailed discussion, see Ushioda, 2012). Furthermore, it is possible that their motivation for language learning may be largely internally driven, such as the intrinsic motivation that is reported to characterise leisure-time users of iTunes U language resources in Rosell-Aguilar's paper. Alternatively, people's motivation for language learning may be regulated more by external pressures and controls, such as the need to complete a course credit or to fulfil the skills requirement for a new job.

Relating these various perspectives to the use of mobile technologies for language learning, an interesting empirical question is whether, from a motivational point of view, it is better that learners are free to choose how much they wish to engage with such technologies (if at all), or whether it is better that learners engage with such technologies as an integral (and possibly credit-bearing) component of their course of study (as suggested, for example, by Wang & Smith in light of their research findings). Broadly speaking, most theoretical arguments would underline the importance of internally driven forms of motivation, since these reflect personal control and autonomy in the learning process and generally lead to high quality engagement in learning. For example, this argument is central to self-determination theory (SDT), which is a general theory of motivation and human growth (Ryan & Deci, 2002), and which has been highly influential in explaining learning motivation in a variety of contexts including language learning (see for example Noels, 2009; Ushioda, 1996). An underlying SDT principle is that people have an innate tendency towards psychological growth and the development of skills and potentialities, and that social-environmental conditions which support people's sense of autonomy or personal control in this process are likely to promote healthy self-determined forms of motivation for learning (see for example the empirical studies in Deci & Ryan, 2002).

Such theoretical arguments would thus seem to imply that the use of mobile technologies should best be left as a matter of free choice and individual autonomy for language learners. This position seems broadly reflected in the design of the four intervention studies reported in this special issue. In Li and Hegelheimer's study, participating ESL students were encouraged to use a web-based mobile application on their mobile devices, but were free to use computers to complete their assignments. In Kim et al.'s study, participating student teachers of TESOL could opt to work with mobile devices or portable computers to undertake the various activities associated with each class project. In Wang & Smith's study, target reading and grammar materials were sent to participating students' mobile phones, but students themselves were free to decide how far they wished to engage with the materials. The fourth intervention study by Lys was somewhat different in that the mobile devices (iPads) were actually given to participating students for completing specific assignments outside class as part of their course. Nevertheless, students had considerable flexibility in how much time they devoted to these assignments and how much work they did.

In short, the need to provide choice, flexibility and autonomy in how students work with mobile technologies is clearly recognised by the researchers in these four intervention studies, while the link between autonomous forms of motivation and mobile language learning emerges strongly in the survey study reported by Rosell-Aguilar. Of course, this general concern with autonomous or independent learning principles has long been core to discussions about technology and language learning, regardless of the nature of the technology (see, for example, Little, 1996; Schwienhorst, 2007). Yet in the case of learning with mobile technologies, this concern takes on an added dimension relating to the personal flexibility offered by mobile learning – that is, the freedom to access language learning tools and resources any time and anywhere, perhaps while on the move or, as reported by some podcast users in Rosell-Aguilar's study, while pursuing other activities. In other words, autonomy, flexibility, freedom and choice are intrinsic features of mobile learning, and by exploiting these features teachers and materials designers may well be able to promote internalised motivation for independent learning.

However, despite their inherent potential for autonomous flexible learning, mobile devices are primarily owned and used for personal and social purposes, which means that their potential as language learning

tools may not be particularly valued or accepted by users. In other words, some students may not feel motivated to use mobile devices for language learning, preferring to work instead with portable computers or desktop PCs as evidenced in the three intervention studies here where students were given a choice of platform. While in many cases students' reported reasons for not using smaller mobile devices related to practical drawbacks such as size of screen and keyboard (for example, Kim et al.), there remains an underlying concern that students may regard their mobile devices and smartphones as their personal territory or 'private space' to be kept clearly separate from their 'studying space' (an argument elaborated by Stockwell, 2008; see also Wang & Smith for commentary on this issue). In short, whatever their motivation towards technology-enhanced language learning in general, some language learners may stop short of wanting to engage with mobile learning, at least until there is a significant change of culture associated with mobile technologies at a local or more global level. In this respect, as suggested by an anonymous reviewer of this commentary article, language teachers can have a significant role to play in helping to change the local institutional culture by creatively and actively promoting mobile learning and demonstrating its benefits and potential, while the growing use of mobile technologies in other subject classes (such as geography or science) may also contribute to a positive change of local culture in relation to mobile language learning.

### **Motivation as a matter of personally meaningful casual learning**

At the same time, for students who do feel motivated to engage with mobile language learning, the findings reported in these papers suggest that the level of engagement may be broadly superficial or casual rather than deep. This superficiality may well reflect the particular affordances of mobile devices as pedagogical tools, such as the packaging of learning content into small bite size chunks, or the facility to dip in and out of learning while on the move. Superficiality of engagement may also reflect the limitations of learning with mobile technologies, such as the difficulty of working at length with a small screen and keyboard to do tasks more easily accomplished on larger devices (see student comments in Kim et al.'s and Li & Hegelheimer's studies). In short, the extent to which mobile technologies can motivate and sustain deep levels of engagement with language learning or language use is perhaps questionable, given their particular design features and constraints.

On the other hand, the potential value of mobile technologies may lie instead in motivating and facilitating frequent (rather than deep) engagement in language learning or language use opportunities. As suggested by Rosell-Aguilar, regular and frequent exposure to the target language is recognised by many learners as an important part of language learning, and such exposure can prove motivating in itself by instilling the feeling that one is learning, regardless of level of cognitive engagement with the language input. Increased opportunities for language practice using mobile technologies may also improve feelings of confidence, as reported by the learners in the study by Lys. In effect, in terms of motivating engagement in mobile learning, learners' own intuitive perceptions and feelings about its benefits for them would seem to play a critical role, even if such engagement remains largely superficial. What seems important is the personal learning value ascribed to such engagement, or as described in Kim et al., the extent to which learning with mobile technologies can engage learners' emotions and feelings in a positive way.

Ultimately, however, the various findings reported in these studies suggest that the power of mobile technologies to motivate deeper and more sustained levels of engagement in language learning may be limited. While much will depend, of course, on how such technologies evolve in the future, the studies reported here would seem to indicate that even intrinsically motivated language learners (such as the podcast users in Rosell-Aguilar's study) are reluctant to invest substantial cognitive or metacognitive effort in mobile learning. When using mobile technologies for language learning, the general preference seems to be for dealing with content that is not too demanding or challenging (as reported by learners in Wang & Smith), for working with tools and features that are quick and easy to use (as reported by learners in Kim et al.), or for engaging with language input in a casual rather than intensive way (as

suggested by the podcast users in Rosell-Aguilar's paper). In Li and Hegelheimer's study where the pedagogical focus was on learning grammar using a web-based mobile application and the task thus required a degree of cognitive effort, only 35% of participating students reported using the mobile app on their own outside the context of class assignments, despite the general perception of its usefulness in developing their grammatical awareness. In short, motivating the more demanding cognitive and metacognitive efforts needed for developing language skills and knowledge may be difficult to achieve using mobile technologies, at least perhaps with smaller handheld devices such as smartphones.

This is clearly an area that merits much more research if we are to understand better how mobile technologies can be pedagogically exploited to facilitate deeper levels of student learning and engagement. While insights from research on mobile learning in other subject domains may be useful in this regard (see for example Vavoula, Pachler & Kukulska-Hulme, 2009), an issue here may be the qualitatively different nature of skill-focused learning (such as language learning) from content-focused learning. Research that has explored motivational perspectives on deep versus surface approaches to learning (such as Fransson, 1984; Marton & Säljö, 1976) has broadly highlighted the kinds of motivation that shape how students engage with and process information content rather than how they develop procedural skills. Thus the extent to which current research insights on using mobile devices in content-focused learning can be applied to understanding student motivation for mobile language learning may be open to question. As emphasized in a recent excellent overview of the motivational potential of mobile technologies for learning in general (Tran, Warschauer & Conley, 2013), our understanding of this potential is still very limited and much research is needed. In this regard, the need for such research in relation to mobile language learning seems even more compelling.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

As I noted in my introduction, a particular strength of the studies in this special issue is their common concern with student perceptions and perspectives in relation to mobile language learning. Whatever the inherent motivating properties and affordances of mobile technologies or of specific mobile applications for language learning, at bottom what matters is the motivation that students bring to mobile language learning, and how this is meaningfully supported and facilitated. As I have commented, mobile learning environments present particular issues of motivation to consider, yet in the end it is the pedagogical need to attend to and nurture students' underlying personal motivations and perspectives that remains of paramount importance as it does for all learning environments. Individual motivation always matters in learning.

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